ON MAKING A DIFFERENCE
Amos 5:21-24; 8:4-12 (T.E.V.)
October 11, 1981

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Reaganomics and the poor: That is what compels this sermon. What should the church do about the drastic reductions in federal help for the needy?

I have seldom, if ever, approached a sermon topic with such terribly strong, and yet such mixed, feelings. So I intend to listen very closely to this sermon because, frankly, I am anxious to find out just what I am going to say.

There is much complexity and ambiguity in the situation. No one denies that our national economy needs a major overhaul. The security of the elderly on fixed incomes, the hopes of young couples for families and homes...those are certainly among the church's concerns for people. The national budget has got to be brought into line, everyone agrees.

Everyone agrees that the federal social programs need various reforms. There are such things as welfare chiselers and second, even third, generation welfare families. There is far too much bureaucratic waste. And everyone agrees that churches can do more for the poor, so when President Reagan calls upon the private sector to take care of the truly needy no longer included in the federal budget, at least part of the private sector ---the church--- nods and says, "Yes, we feel a responsibility there. We can do more."

But then it becomes ambiguous. Budget cuts are made not just at the expense of bad anti-poverty programs. Effective and desperately needed ones are also crippled, or eliminated. Not only the welfare cheats, but also people in abject and undeniable need, are cut off. All this is done so quickly that, even if the churches have the ability to respond, bonefide needs are so massive that there will be great suffering before churches can hastily put the necessary new systems together. And the money saved for the most part does not reduce the national debt; it gets spent, not saved. Spent on the most inflation producing expenditures there are---spent on bombs and bombers.

Do you grasp that dreadful irony? As churches save government the expense of poverty programs, much of the saving winds up fueling the insane nuclear race, as national policy now stands. I think churches, now being called to the domestic front line, should also insist on being on the front lines of decisions concerning peace and war. The painful, overwhelming situation being forced on churches is saturated with tragedy and irony. Still, one imperative holds fast to guide Christians. It should also guide this "one nation under God". The scriptures speak of it over and over again. Perhaps it comes most clearly and forcefully through the Old Testament prophet Amos. Listen as he presents God confronting first the church and then the nation of his own day:

> The Lord says, "I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them! When you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; I will not accept the animals you have fattened to bring me as offerings. Stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps. Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry."
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> Listen to this, you that trample on the needy and try to destroy the poor of the country. You say to yourselves, "We can hardly wait for the holy days to be over so that we can sell our grain. When will the Sabbath end, so that we can start selling again? Then we can overcharge, use

false measures, and fix the scales to cheat our customers. We can sell worthless wheat at a high price. We'll find a poor man who can't pay his debts, not even the price of a pair of sandals, and we'll buy him as a slave."

The Lord, the God of Israel, has sworn, "I will never forget their evil deeds. And so the earth will quake, and everyone in the land will be in distress. The whole country will be shaken; it will rise and fall like the Nile River. The time is coming when I will make the sun go down at noon and the earth grow dark in daytime. I, the Sovereign Lord, have spoken. I will turn your festivals into funerals and change your glad songs into cries of grief. I will make you shave your heads and wear sackcloth, and you will be like parents mourning for their only son. That day will be bitter to the end.

"The time is coming when I will send famine on the land. People will be hungry, but not for bread; they will be thirsty, but not for water. They will hunger and thirst for a message from the Lord, I, the Sovereign Lord, have spoken. People will wander from Sea to Sea, from the north to the east. They will look everywhere for a message from the Lord, but they will not find it."

The scriptural message is that both church and nation are expressly charged with responsibility for justice which focuses on the plight of the poor. Without that concern, the church will not be heard by God. Without that concern, the nation will suffer calamity upon calamity, and the ultimate catastrophe will be that they have shut themselves off from God---they will not find any message from Him. Justice, then, caring for the poor, is absolutely necessary if nation or church is to have a continuing relationship with God.

The way we deal with the poor speaks volumes about how serious we are in all our dealings with God. Not only Amos, but repeatedly prophetic voices made the point: If we mess up our responsibility for the poor, the needy, the victim, the outcast, then we are messing up our relationship to the God who is Father of us all. The last parable we received from Jesus emphasizes that truth. (We read it as our Responsive Reading - Matthew 5:38-48; 25:34-40). Who are the ones to be welcomed into God's kingdom? According to the Parable of the Last Judgment, it is those who feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, receive the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. How important is that? The King shall say unto them, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me."

Three weeks ago, John Buchanan's sermon quoted another sermon that was preached from this pulpit in 1937. After extensive remodeling, the sanctuary was being re-dedicated. It was the fiftieth anniversary of this congregation and the preacher was challenging the congregation about their future. He asked, "What will a citizen of Columbus write in his annals about the difference this church made?"

I shared a long conversation several weeks ago which came at that from an unusual perspective. A young Cambodian woman went on at considerable length to describe the impression this church's ministry had made after her brief acquaintance with it. She described how her own lifelong religion, Buddhism, offers a deeply spiritual and philosophical view of life. "Buddhism teaches us to accept passively whatever our situation, " she said. "We hope we will be granted a better life in the next existence, or the one after that. But you people, " she went on, "you try to make a difference now. You work to make things right. I like that much better."

Another reflection was voiced by one of our newer members who transferred from a strong church in another city. "My old church was a good Sunday church, " she said. "But Broad Street is a seven-day-a-week church."

There is indeed a strong tradition of daily community ministry here---food pantry, clothing center, recreation and educational programs for children and youth year-round, emergency assistance, counseling, a building used seven days a week by every sort of community group, financial contributions to help struggling service projects and halfway houses.

The helping spirit of this congregation is evident whenever it is called upon. Most recently our Deacons' Fund for emergency assistance was completely used up and the congregation was so informed. Last week's offering for that fund was over $600, more than double previous years'. I hasten to add that, with things looking as they do, that still may not last very long. All in all, I think a Columbus citizen of the past forty-four years would write in his annals that Broad Street Church has indeed made quite a difference. Of course, in 1937 the government was just beginning to get serious about social projects. The years since this sanctuary was rededicated have been years of increasing federal poverty programs. Still Broad Street Church found there were many gaps, many people with great needs no government agency was prepared to help, even when those agencies were most numerous and most generously funded. Now that is all being reversed. Helping agencies are being dismantled or drastically restricted. Great reductions are being made in government assistance with such basic needs as food, shelter, and jobs.

It is no longer a question of churches filling the gaps, providing the backup. Churches are expected to be the front line. That 1937 question has very different implications when we ask it in the fall of 1981: Can Broad Street Church make a difference now?

What the scope of that challenge will be, no one can fully predict at the moment. But there are some clues. For instance, a new soup kitchen in the downtown area served 500 a day in September. The central referral agency CALL has been receiving six or more pleas daily for help in paying gas bills from last winter so heat will be turned on. For several weeks we received two or three such requests here each day. The bills are typically $200 to $400 and I do not know any agency able to handle that. We certainly couldn't. There is already a great increase in people spending the night in the streets. I am told the children's slide in our church playground has recently served one man as bed. Emergency food pantries, our own included, are experiencing a large increase in need already, and the weather is not yet cold. I don't have to tell you about skyrocketing utility rates. Both the welfare poor and the working poor typically live in leaky, drafty apartments and dilapidated houses. Thousands of such Columbus families will be forced to choose between heat and food this winter. The drastically cut food stamp program will be far too little. Many will turn up at food pantries for the first time and will return repeatedly. The number of transients is already on the rise---people coming to Columbus in search of work. After their first two nights here in a mission - all that is permitted - it is almost impossible to find inexpensive places for them to stay in order to continue their job search, so they are forced to leave without finding work.

I offer this as a brief sketch of the tip of the iceberg. This is what I see personally acting as your staff person charged with community ministry. And ,

remember, I do not go out into the streets looking for people in difficulty. All I see is those who somehow find their way to our church doors. How big the iceberg of poverty crisis will be in Columbus this winter, only time and suffering will show.

Now, if I were sitting in your place at this moment, I'd be waiting for the big ending, the upbeat climax of this woeful sermon. I'd be waiting for the preacher to spell out the answers, the solutions he has already constructed. I deeply regret that there is no such ending for this sermon. I'd like to be able to tell you that all portions of the private sector are springing forward to meet the crisis. I'd like to tell you the corporations have promised to donate a major part of the tax savings which poverty program cuts will bring them. I'd like to tell you that, contrary to his past record, the President will begin to set a personal example of charitable giving which will inspire both well-off and wealthy Americans. I'd like to see evidence that such things will happen. I hope they will.

I'd like to tell you I see signs of greatly increased compassion for the plight of poor people. But instead, I hear increased use of the tired self-serving slurs. Sure there are some welfare chiselers. A recent study concludes they exist in about the same percentage as do the cheaters among employees and officers of every large corporation. Not much reason for an attitude of superiority there. I think Christians have a responsibility to point out the truth that the great majority of the poor are in fact neighbors in real need. Let's not allow our national conscience to be salved by the lie that most poor are lazy cheaters.

I'd also like to tell you that the sudden and drastic changes in federal programs will be balanced so quickly by efforts from the private sector that in Columbus no aged, inform widow will die of pneumonia in an unheated room; no infant needing formula will suffer life-long brain damage from malnutrition; no loner will freeze to death overnight under a bridge; no desperate, out-of-work father will steal because his children are hungry. I'd like to assure you of that, but I can't. All the signs are that we'll be reading just such newspaper accounts this winter.

But there are some things I can tell you. I can tell you this church has already taken initiative to try to pool the resources of Columbus Presbyterian churches and to band together the downtown area churches who minister most directly to poverty. I can assure you that the Broad Street pastors, staff, and volunteers involved now in meeting poverty needs will continue to do the best job possible carrying on ministries this church is noted for. I can assure you that you are needed to increase that effort, that your volunteering time, money, food and clothing are vital to make the difference this winter. You will be hearing more about ways to help. And I can assure you that your deeds of compassion for the poor will strengthen your relationship with our God, the God who tells us we'll find Him among the least of these, our brothers and sisters in need. Together serving Him, we <u>can</u> make a difference.

God, our Father, we offer our prayer for brothers and sisters in need, and for ourselves. Help us to be generous and compassionate, reflecting Your generosity to us each day, reflecting Your compassion for us proved in Jesus Christ, who calls His followers to special ministry with the poor.

Amen.